



6 Rules to Designing e-Learning for Maximum Motivation

by Ethan Edwards, Chief Instructional Strategist

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“ Designing e-learning that actually **makes a difference** requires more than just instructional design, technology, and project management. It's crucial to trust your own experience with your learners and **make practical and common sense choices** that are proven to be the most important. ”

Ethan Edwards
Chief Instructional Strategist

Intro

Learner motivation is a critical success factor in designing e-learning that makes a difference. In an individualized learning setting, like asynchronous web-based training programs, active learner engagement is necessary for learning to occur. It's vital (usually more challenging) to design interactivity to draw in the learner to commit to the authentic behavior needed for learning to occur, rather just than the instructional designer getting the content "right." This e-book presents some straightforward and effective design strategies to create learner motivation in e-learning.

There are two fundamental assumptions about learning that are pretty universally accepted by the learning community. It is important to restate them as too often instructional designs fail to address them.

The Pitfall of Rewards

The common approach to motivation is through providing a test or challenge with the carrot of a high score. Unfortunately, since these scores rarely translate into something tangible, they have relatively little long-term importance. And these somewhat superficial rewards tend to motivate the learner to excel at "e-learning behaviors" (answering multiple-choice questions) rather than the underlying performance goals. Motivation for learning needs a more meaningful and lasting hook.

Intro

Through research, there is a consistent motivation: to get finished with the training. The challenge in design is to introduce a motivation for the learner that supersedes his or her need to get done quickly. Success comes when the most efficient route to complete a course module is the most attractive path for the learner, and also the path that ensures mastery.

Motivation Design Begins with Instructional Interactivity

The ways to vary the delivery of content seem to have relatively little impact on someone's motivation to learn. This is because no matter how elaborately the content is embellished and augmented with audio narration, video clips, or animated avatars, the learner is usually left in the role of a passive observer.

However, the actual tasks and challenges put before the learner are one of the largest factors of learner motivation. Instructional interactivity requires careful creation of a context with specific meaning for the learner, personal challenges that the learner values, actions that require thought and intention, and intrinsic feedback that coaches the learner on how to do better.

Six Rules to Enhance Learner Motivation

But as the designer creates [Context-Challenge-Activity Feedback interactions](#), there are some simple yet effective rules to keep in mind to further enhance the learner motivation.

Rule 1: Say Less

E-Learning programs are usually packed with too much content. You must be ruthless in editing content. There is a tendency to view e-learning as a textbook—a receptacle for everything an expert could know about a given topic. But naïve learners are rarely able to figure out what is important and what will be useful to them and not figure that out until way down the road. Overwhelming the learner with too much information is a great way to disengage his or her attention. The design should only include information that is specific, relevant, and useful for the learner. If you must deliver additional content, place it in a “Resources” section that they can choose to reference if desired.

Motivation Design?

How can you embed the content directly into the Challenge, Context, and Feedback of the interaction, letting the learner Activity deliver necessary content?

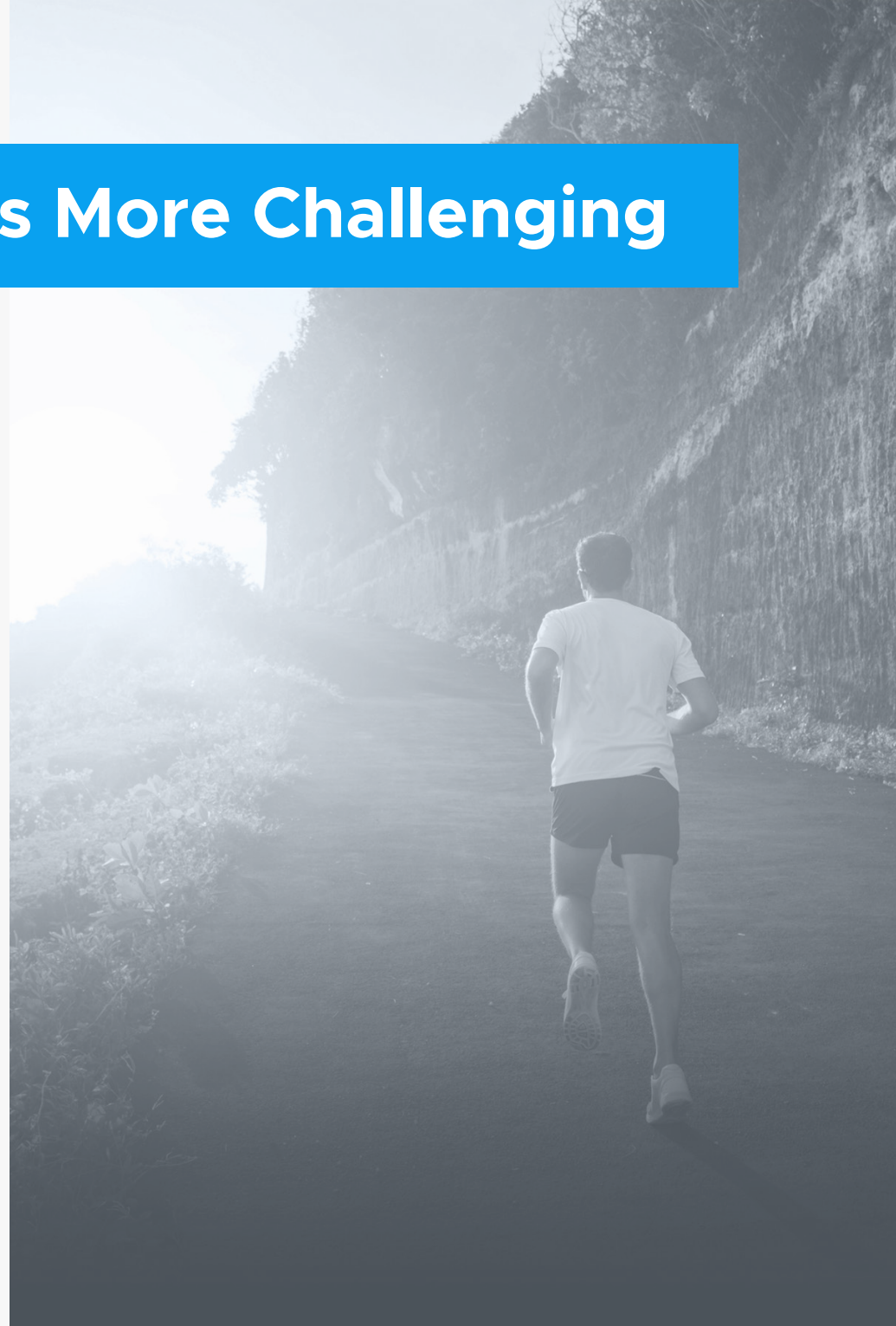


Rule 2: Make Interactions More Challenging

Many designers try to soften the demands of e-learning, thinking that learners won't mind it so much if the lesson is not terribly challenging. In fact, the reverse is the case. If learners can coast through a module thoughtlessly with no accountability for attention, the e-learning becomes tedious and boring. Instead, create challenges that require authentic actions, demand thought and attention, and hold the learner accountable. This doesn't mean make the questions harder; it does mean enabling more meaningful choices, expecting critical thinking, encouraging effective research activities, and urging more than minimal competency.

Motivation Design?

What ways can you create interest and focus by balancing appropriate difficulty with challenges that require independence and resourcefulness from the learner?



Rule 3: Delay Judgement

It is motivating to have the opportunity to think. One of the most productive moments for critical thinking in an interaction takes place as the learner considers potential responses. When judgment of the learner response's correctness is given immediately, the opportunity for the learner to consider the choice, assess alternatives, and think about consequences is effectively eliminated. By delaying judgment, learners can try to test the correctness of the choice independently, perhaps changing a choice, building a level of investment in the content that increases attention and aids memory.

Motivation Design?

Can you give more responsibility to each learner to self-assess and correct responses independently before delivering specific judgment as to correctness?



Rule 4: Appeal to Emotion

Learning is enhanced when content is tied to elevated emotions. Too often, content is presented in a “Just the facts, ma’am” style, as if the learner can absorb unfamiliar content and tie it to personal aspects of purpose and meaning. Linking content to commonly held values, risks, concerns, successes, and desires will enhance the importance attached to learning outcomes.

Motivation Design?

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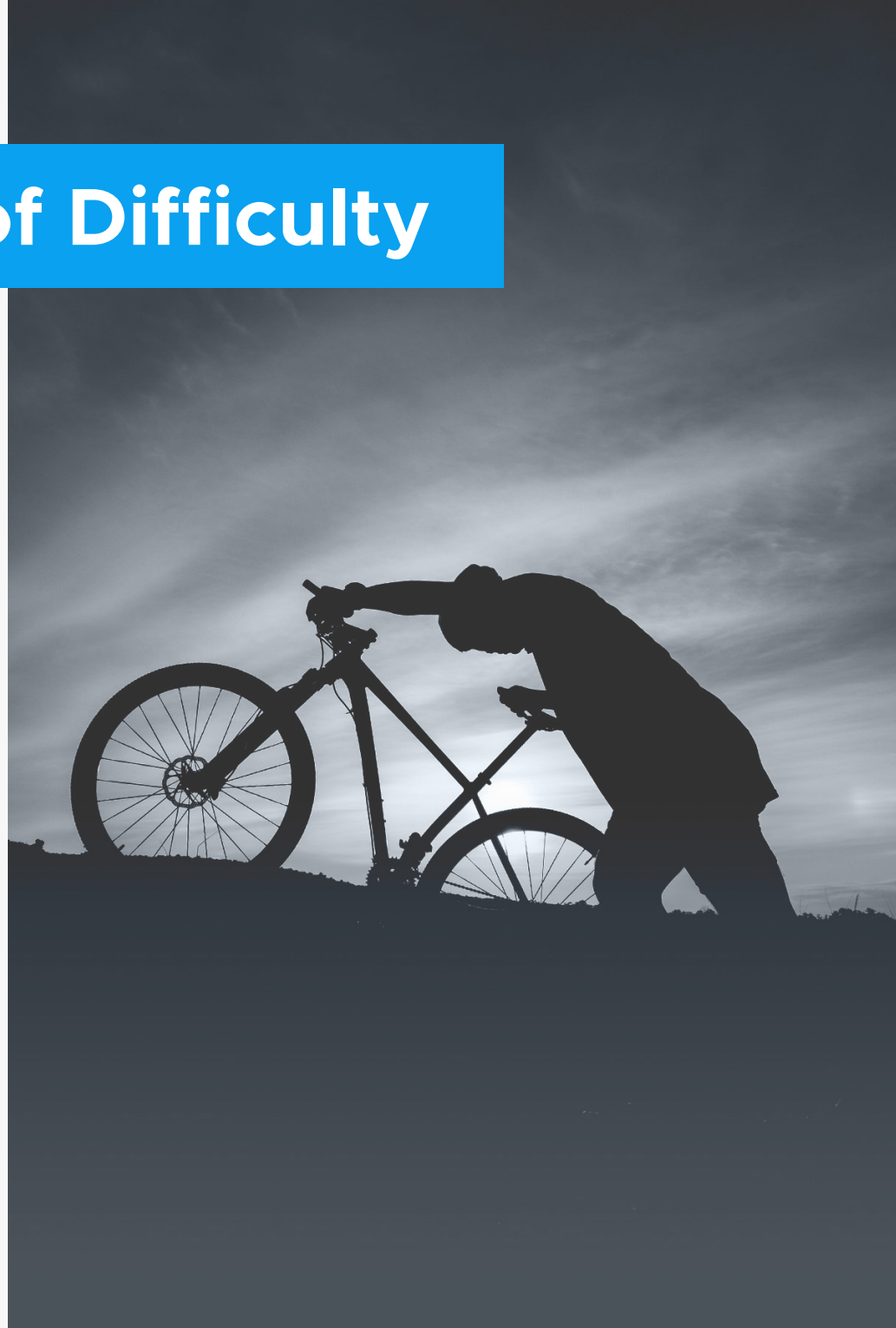


Rule 5: Create Level of Difficulty

Much e-learning is so dreadfully disengaging simply because it does not seem to progress anywhere. When the interactivity consists entirely of asking simplistic questions from the beginning of the module to the end, the learner gets no sense of improvement or progress. Instead, challenges should increase in difficulty and complexity as the learner demonstrates mastery. Accomplish this by designing performance levels, systematically reduce the amount of help provided, and carefully increase complexity as learners demonstrate mastery.

Motivation Design?

How can you systematically increase the difficulty of your challenges to provide a tangible indicator of progress and increased competence in the learner?



Rule 6: Give More Control to Learners

This last rule may be viewed as a summation of the previous five rules. As you expect more out of the learner, you must also be willing to reduce your own control and extend influence to the learner. Increase user control by letting learners set the pace, select sequence, choose to review, construct answers, ask for help, decide when ready to be tested, and choose the overall learning style. This can be achieved simply by designing fewer restrictions into the interactions.

Motivation Design?

What navigation and interface elements might you make less restrictive to empower the learner to be more fully responsible for selecting the best personal path to achieve mastery?



Putting It to Work

Recap: Six Rules to Enhance Learner Motivation

1. Say Less
2. Make Interactive More Challenging
3. Delay Judgment
4. Appeal to Emotions
5. Create Level of Difficulty
6. Give More Control to Learners

These rules are not particularly complex, but they do require that designers let go of the high level of control typically accepted as desirable. The learner must be at the center of the training rather than the content or the academic artifacts of a training curriculum. The secret of success is to balance the demands of content and performance objectives with the real constraints of creating individual motivation in the learners as they work independently through e-learning course modules. Motivation is the essential element that will make any learning Meaningful and Memorable.

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Ethan Edwards draws on more than 30 years of industry experience as an e-learning instructional designer and developer. He is responsible for the delivery of the internal and external training and communications that reflect Allen Interactions' unique perspective on designing and developing Meaningful, Memorable, and Motivational e-learning programs.

Ethan is the primary instructor for [ATD's e-Learning Instructional Design Certificate Program](#). In addition, he is an internationally recognized speaker on e-learning instructional design, is a primary blogger on [Allen Interactions' e-Learning Leadership Blog](#) and has published many e-books on creating effective e-learning. Ethan holds a master's degree and significant doctoral work in educational psychology from the University of Illinois—Urbana-Champaign.

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